

#ElectionClass: Encouraging Strategic Thinking About Politics Through Social Media

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Abstract

#ElectionClass is a course on social media and the 2012 election offered by the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. The course involves in-class tweeting, analysis of the real presidential election, as well as a mock campaign project. A number of students took on additional interdisciplinary efforts that emerged as a result of the coursework. #ElectionClass's experiential teaching model promotes students' lifelong learning and engagement with social media by giving them a voice and a role in a real-life event.

Keywords: social media, interactive, data, learning, politics

Introduction

The phrase was featured all over the news throughout the past few months: the 2012 election was the most social election of all time. The millions of tweets, Facebook likes, and Instagram shares that were generated by the Obama and Romney campaigns were a manifestation of the success of true voter engagement.

The American people had the opportunity to be involved in the political process on a whole new level, thanks to the campaigns' use of social media. This was many citizens' first exposure to social networks, and their experience with social media has motivated them to continue using these networks long after the election has ended. In short, the social media use during the election was a catalyst for what could be a lifelong desire to learn.

A group of approximately 120 Syracuse University students had the chance to experience the 2012 election in an even more revolutionary way. Enter: #ElectionClass.

What is #ElectionClass?

IST 500: Social Media and the 2012 Election, more commonly known as #ElectionClass, is an immersive experience that challenges students to think strategically and develop detailed political campaigns rooted in social media.

The course, designed and taught by Professor Anthony Rotolo, aims to explore the impact of social media on elections, political movements and citizen engagement with a special focus on the 2012 American Election as it unfolds in real time. Throughout the course, undergraduate and graduate students from all majors across the University use the real election as the lens for viewing how emerging technologies and citizens' social media engagement impact candidates, campaigns, voters, and success at the polls.

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Course Structure

During class, students engage in lectures by live-tweeting their thoughts and responses (tagged with #ElectionClass), which are displayed on a Twitter feed at the front of the room. The #ElectionClass hashtag has nationally trended on Twitter nearly every week throughout the semester. On average, over 1,300 tweets using the #ElectionClass hashtag are generated in each three-hour class.

Students' careful analysis in class often results in extremely interesting findings. But the major #ElectionClass project challenged students to do much more than observe the American political campaigns. Instead, they organized their own.

The #ElectionClass Campaign

At the beginning of the course, undergraduate students were randomly divided into 14 campaign teams. Each six-to-eight person team was assigned a campaign candidate persona. Personas ranged from "democratic senator from New York State," to a "republican governor from Alaska." These campaigns would take place in "Amercia," an alternate universe and America's "sister country," whose name is inspired by a spelling error in a mobile application launched by the Romney campaign. Meanwhile, the graduate students in the course took on the role of members of the media that would cover the campaigns as they unfolded. The course syllabus detailed the campaign project, weekly reading assignments, blogging assignments, and quizzes.

On the first day of class, each team selected a student to play the role of their candidate, and the race was on. By the end of class that day, campaign Twitter accounts were launched, website domain names were purchased, and campaign strategies were formulated. The goal? Garner enough support throughout the course to win the in-class Amercian election, held on November 6, just like it was in the real world.

Learning Goals

Each candidate and team was tasked with executing a complete social media strategy, leveraging any networks they wished. Nearly every team created a Twitter and Facebook page in addition to realistic-looking websites. Tweets and Facebook posts included everything from information on the candidates' stances on foreign and domestic issues (which mirrored those of America), or interactions with their "constituents" (classmates) and fellow candidates.

The student candidates also participated in two primary debates, moderated by Professor Rotolo, which brought with them all of the excitement, controversy, and social media frenzy that was seen in the Obama-Romney debates. Candidates were eliminated based on live straw poll results after each debate, until one republican and one democrat were selected.

Campaign Progression

In true #ElectionClass fashion, the unexpected happened. An independent candidate, Carter Rhodes (played by iSchool student Brad Slavin) emerged to join the Democrat, Matt Diaz (played by Jared Kraham), and Republican, Robert Lawrence (played by iSchool student Bob O'Brien). Rhodes created his own political party (the "Everyone Is Invited To This [Party]) and after securing enough signatures on a petition, was permitted to participate in the final debate.

The emergence of an independent candidate was not the only deviation from the course syllabus. Because of their excitement about social media and their desire to use their skills in innovative ways, a number of students developed projects that were incorporated into the class. The students that were most successful in the course demonstrated a genuine desire to apply their skills outside of class and go above and beyond the required projects. These students tweeted relevant articles and insights not only during the three-hour class each week, but throughout the week. They religiously followed news outlets and watched the presidential debates. Students who failed to track the news and put their coursework into practice may have struggled to find the true value in the course.

Additional Interdisciplinary Efforts

Because the focal point of #ElectionClass is the mock campaigns, it quickly became clear that a fair Election Day voting method would need to be developed, especially because final voting was not only open to #ElectionClass members, but also to the entire Syracuse University campus.

#ElectionClass Voting System

In keeping with the trend of students going above and beyond the syllabus requirements, iSchool seniors and #ElectionClass students Andrew Bauer and Chris Becker developed a revolutionary voting dashboard using a full LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP) stack that allowed students to cast their votes on a touch screen, with the results being tallied in real time.

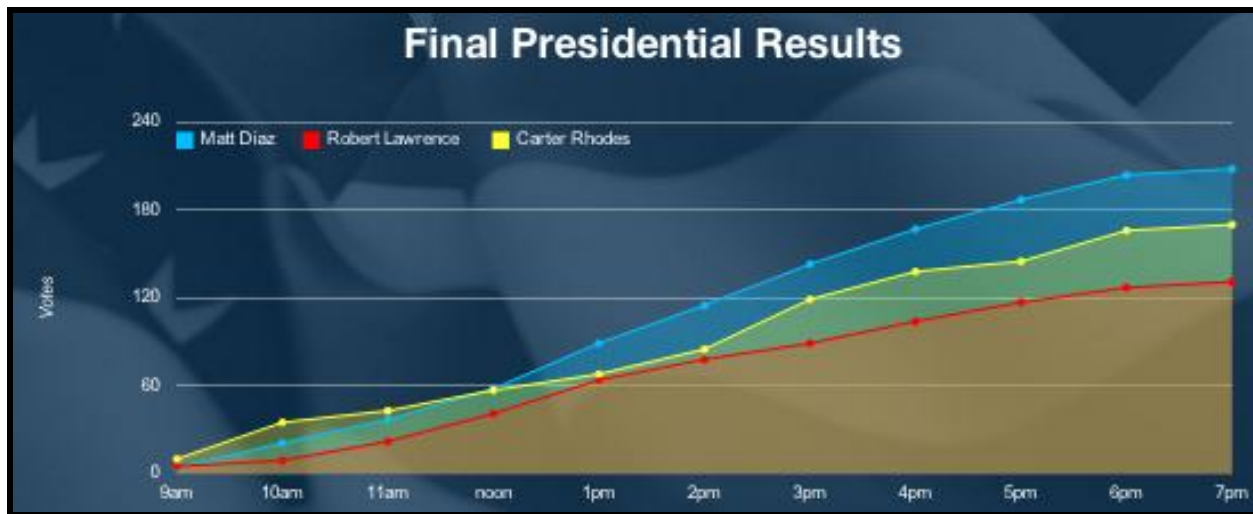
The dashboard contained a list of the candidates and their political stances, as well as boxes for students to click as they cast their votes. After the initial vote was cast, students were led to a new screen and asked to answer exit poll questions related to each candidate's use of social media, quality of political ads, and debate performance. Bauer and Becker compiled data from exit poll questions to provide the class with real-time updates throughout Election Day.

#ElectionClass Voting Results

Voter feedback indicated that the #ElectionClass dashboard provided a more favorable voting experience than the paper ballots used for the real election. Over 500 votes were cast in the mock election, which exceeded the number of real election votes cast at the on-campus local polling place. This was a clear manifestation of the success of #ElectionClass students' passion for putting what they've learned into action.

Figure 1

#ElectionClass Final Presidential Voting Results



Collected November 6, 2012

This chart displays data collected from 9 AM to 7 PM on November 6, 2012 in the NEXIS social media research lab.

What #ElectionClass Illustrates

The interactive nature of #ElectionClass demonstrates that when students are passionate about a topic that is timely and relevant to their daily lives, they will go far beyond what is required of them, simply because they're excited about it. The strong parallels between the course and the real election allowed students to feel a sense of accomplishment as they experienced political success.

The nature of the class, particularly the presence of the Twitter stream, encourages students to make their voices heard across social media. The campaign teams thrived by thinking critically about their social media strategies, and were motivated by a desire to spread their messages and encourage their constituents to show their support on social media, and ultimately, with a vote. The candidates' reputations were on the line, and each team worked hard to preserve them.

The course syllabus did not require campaign teams to complete specific social media tasks. For example, there was no assignment for campaigns to send out a certain number of tweets, or to obtain a minimum number of Facebook likes. The campaign project turned students into forward-thinking self-starters, as they crafted their social media strategies based on what they were learning, not what they were forced to do. Students recognized that there was more than just their grade on the line; they also had to protect their candidate and team's reputation. They were motivated to do additional work and create a myriad of extra campaign materials and social media accounts, simply because the course encouraged friendly competition.

The voting dashboard project was born out of students' desire to build something better than what is currently available. The final product was created using skills the students developed in the iSchool, and required a thorough understanding of social media engagement. Moreover, the dashboard technology can now be used in future elections, on campus and beyond. It's a physical contribution from a course rooted in digital.

Conclusion

The legacy of #ElectionClass lives on not only through the voting dashboard, but also through the campaigns themselves. Campaign teams created stickers, buttons, and posters to supplement their social media strategy, and those materials can still be found all over campus. The media coverage the course received, from local news and national media, including the Today Show, intrigued members of the campus community and encouraged them to see the role of social media in a new light.

#ElectionClass demonstrates that social media provide a way to foster a unique learning experience. The innovative teaching method employed by the course provides a model for future courses based on interactivity, timeliness of the course topic, and encouraging students to compete to develop the best campaign or project. It is an effective vehicle to engage students to make their voices heard, and empower them to search for real-life applications of social media that will allow us to experience elections and other events like never before.

Reference

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